"Suzerain Treaties & The Covenant Documents the Bible"

Notes from lectures of Dr. Meredith Kline, presented at Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, California, Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, in Massachusetts

Brief Summary of Suzerain Treaties:

In the Ancient Near East, treaties between kings was common. These were treaties drawn up among equals and mostly outlined agreements to honor each other's boundaries, to maintain trade relations, and return run-away slaves. These treaties are preserved in the Mari Tablets and in the Amarna texts. Also preserved in these collections are treaties drafted between a superior and his inferior. If the relationship was familial or friendly, the parties are referred to as "father" and "son." If the relationship is bereft of kindness and intimacy, the parties are referred to as "lord" and "servant," or "king" and "vassal," or "greater king" and "lesser king." The greater king is the suzerain and the lesser king is a prince, or a lesser lord in the service of the greater king. The lesser lord is a representative of all the common people who are under the protection of the greater king. He enforces the treaty among the masses.

These Suzerain/Vassal treaties open with two sections: 1) The identification of the Suzerain by his name and titles; 2) The historical survey of the Suzerain's dealings with the vassal. The purpose is to illustrate to the vassal how much the Suzerain has done to protect and establish the vassal who therefore owes submission and allegiance to the Suzerain. These two sections are referred to as the "Preamble."

The next section of these treaties list the "stipulations." What the vassal is required to do is spelled out in principal and detail. This section is often concluded with the requirement that the vassal deposit his copy of the treaty in his temple, where he is to occasionally read and study it to refresh his memory concerning his duties.

The last section of these treaties contains the blessings and curses of the Suzerain. If the stipulations are met by the vassal, he will receive the Suzerain's blessings, which are listed. If the vassal fails to meet the stipulations, he will receive the Suzerain's curses, which are also listed.

The Suzerain would keep one copy of the treaty and the vassal would keep one copy of the treaty. A number of ratifying ceremonies were used depending upon the era and culture. But the most widely used rite was that of cutting the bodies of animals in halves and placing them in two rows with enough space between for the two parties of the treaty to walk

side by side. As they walked between the pieces, they were vowing to each other, "May what has happened to these animals, happen to me if I break this covenant with you."

Covenant Documents of the Bible Patterned After Suzerain Treaties:

Exodus 20

- (1-2)*"Yahweh"* is the Suzerain who delivered this Preamble to Moses, the vassal-lord who represents the people under the authority of the Suzerain.
- names & titles = "I am the Lord, your God."
- historical prologue = "Who brought you out of Egypt..."
- (3-17) Stipulations with selected blessings and curses.
- stipulations = the 10 commandments;
- blessings and curses = (5b-6); (7b); (12b).

Dueteronomy

- *(This entire book of Moses is saturated with Suzerain Treaty language and structure. It is not properly the treaty document itself, but it is based upon such a treaty, making reference to it often. Below are some examples.)*
- (4:32-40) Historical Prologue language and structure;
- (4:44 - 5:21) Stipulations;
- (6:4-25) Blessings and Curses;
- (8) Reflects all the sections of a suzerain treaty;
- (11) " " "
- (17:14-20) Reflects the relationship of a vassal king to the Suzerain;
- (20) Reflects the language and structure of war-time arrangements between a Suzerain and his people;
- (27-28) Curses and Blessings;
- (29) Covenant Renewal;
- (30:11-19) Classic presentation of Ancient Near East Treaties!
- *(A question along the lines of "what came first, the chicken or the egg?" Did God see fit to present his covenant to his people in a cultural form developed by Near Eastern empires, or did God's original pattern for his covenant in Eden inform and form the cultural pattern of the Ancient Near East?)*